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Poindexter Shielded Iran Deal Details, Sources Say

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WASHINGTON—During the time President Reagan's secret arms-and-hostages deal with Tehran was going forward, then-National Security Adviser John M. Poindexter specifically told senior intelligence specialists on the National Security Council staff not to scrutinize the Middle East hostage issue, Administration officials said Wednesday.

Poindexter's unusual move—apparently an effort to preclude criticism that might have aborted the risky venture—had the effect of shielding the Iran operation from the expert analysis and criticism normally given to such undertakings.

"It's clear they wanted to keep it 'off-line' [out of normal channels] to avoid the kind of scrutiny by the standing procedures for approving covert action proposals that killed at least one Casey project in the past," said one knowledgeable official. He was referring to William J. Casey, head of the CIA.

By "they" the official was referring to Poindexter and his fired deputy, Lt. Col. Oliver L. North and—by inference perhaps—to Central Intelligence Agency officials who were called on to help implement President Reagan's Jan. 17 intelligence "finding," which secretly authorized U.S. arms shipments to Iran.

Some congressional staff members are examining the possibility that Dewey Claridge, a close Casey aide who headed CIA operations in Central America that led to the mining of Nicaraguan harbors in 1983, may have played an important role in the diversion of funds from the Tehran arms sales to the contra forces by way of Swiss banks.

For the last year, Claridge has been head of the CIA counterterrorism group, which brought him in close contact with North, whose dual jobs at the NSC were to follow the Nicaraguan contras and terrorists in the Mideast.

Some sources familiar with the affair are concerned about the possibility that Casey, who was instructed by the President not to circulate the "finding" within the government, may have been instrumental in persuading the President to bypass the NSC intelligence staff as well as to keep the document secret for most of this year.

It was only 10 days ago that the document was finally provided to the NSC's intelligence staff and ordered to be circulated within the broad intelligence community of the government, including the departments of State, Defense and Justice, as well as the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the CIA and other agencies.

The document provides, in paraphrase, that President Reagan had found it in this country's national interest to provide arms to Iran to persuade moderate elements in the

Tehran government to use their influence to reduce the hostility of that government to the United States and to affect its policy of sponsoring terrorism, officials said.

No mention of using the arms to obtain release of U.S. hostages was formally stated in the document, in line with the Administration's contention that its initial aim was to improve the position of moderates in Iran.

However, knowledgeable officials expressed the view that the real aim quickly became the freedom of Americans held hostage by pro-Iranian extremists in Lebanon.

Other Hidden 'Findings'?

Officials who provided this account maintained that established procedures for determining the need for a covert action, such as the clandestine arms sales to Iran, had been circumvented in several ways in this case.

They said it was the first time in the six-year history of the Administration, during which several dozen "findings" have been signed, that these procedures were not followed. When asked if Poindexter

might have hidden away other "findings," as well, one official quipped:

"When they cleaned out his safe, they didn't find any others."

Had the normal scrutiny been given to the proposed arms-to-Iran action, the group of eight senior officials who are supposed to examine such findings before they are signed—a group consisting of second- or third-ranking officials in their departments—would have immediately raised "red flags" on at least two grounds, the officials said.

First, providing "lethal material" to a country such as Iran, which has been extremely hostile to the United States, is blatantly not in the U.S. national interest, they said, particularly without identifying the moderates and ensuring the start of a dialogue.

Second, it would have been immediately clear that the aim of establishing a dialogue with moderates was only an excuse to win the hostages' freedom and thereby a violation of standing Administration policy of paying ransom to terrorists, the official said.